Chord-Melody Secrets

BY CHARLES CHAPMAN

WHENEVER I PLAY A JAZZ chord-melody arrangement, students inevitably ask, "How'd you do that?" It takes practice, but the basic technique is straightforward, once you know a few secrets.

The place to start mastering chord-melody is with "drop-2" voicings. To create a drop-2 voicing, simply take a closed-voiced chord and lower the second note from the top down an octave. Ex. 1 shows a third-inversion *Dm7*, first in closed and then in drop-2 voicing.

To play a tune chord-melody-style:

- Raise the melody up an octave to place it on the top strings.
- While playing the melody, look for opportunities to support it with chords voiced on the lower strings.
- Apply a drop-2 voicing to all chords that fall on strong beats.
- When the melody note you wish to harmonize is a *non*-chord tone, eliminate the chord tone immediately beneath it and play the resulting harmony in drop-2 voicing.

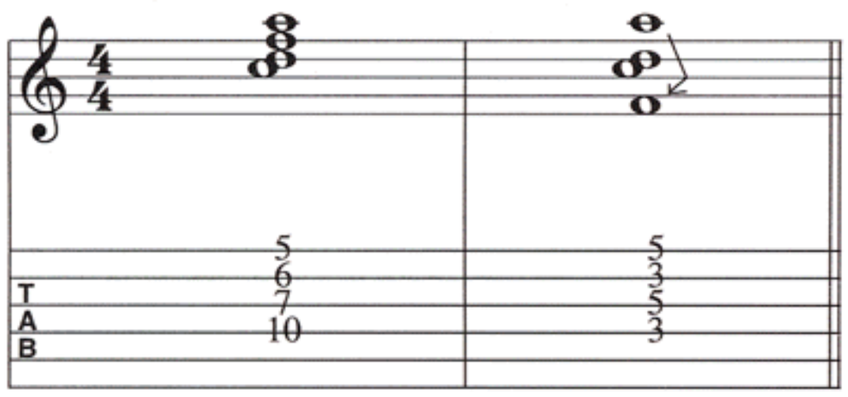
Ex. 2 illustrates this non-chord-tone treatment using an *A* melody above a first-inversion *Gmaj7* chord (*B, D, F♯, G*). Eliminate *G*, the pitch directly beneath the melody *A*, and then drop *F♯*—now the second note from the top—down an octave.

Play Ex. 3, a typical ballad melody, and then play Ex. 4 to hear it rendered chord-melody style.

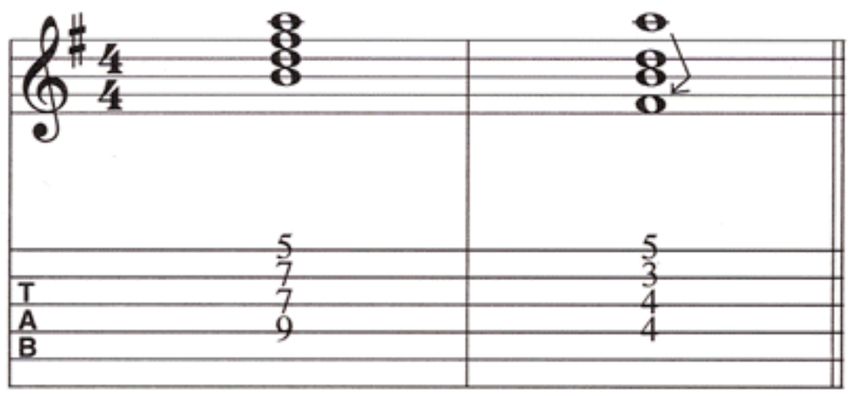
Drop-2 is a mainstay that always works, but don't limit yourself. Experiment with other voicings as you get comfortable with the style. Rock and blues forms generally aren't appropriate for chord-melody, but let your ear make the final decision—it's still the ultimate judge. If nothing seems to work, it's always acceptable to play the melody by itself.

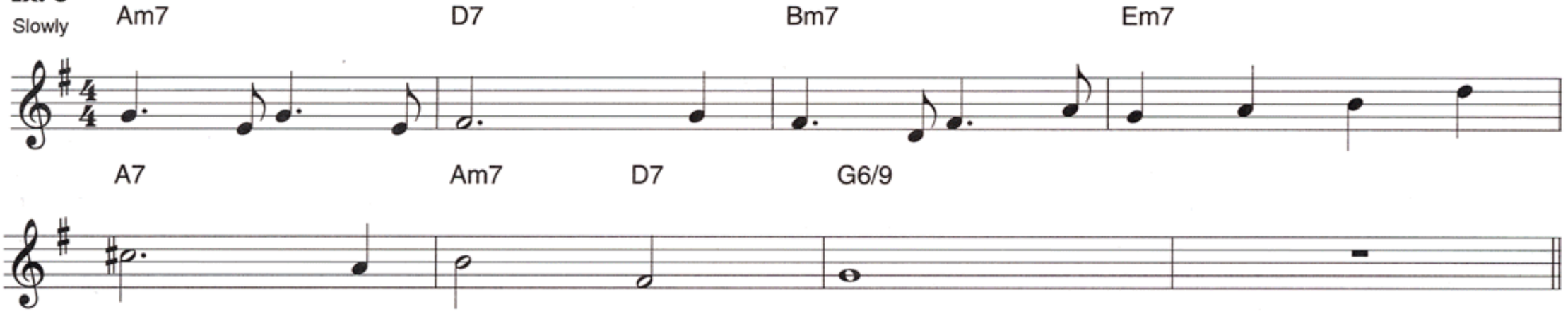
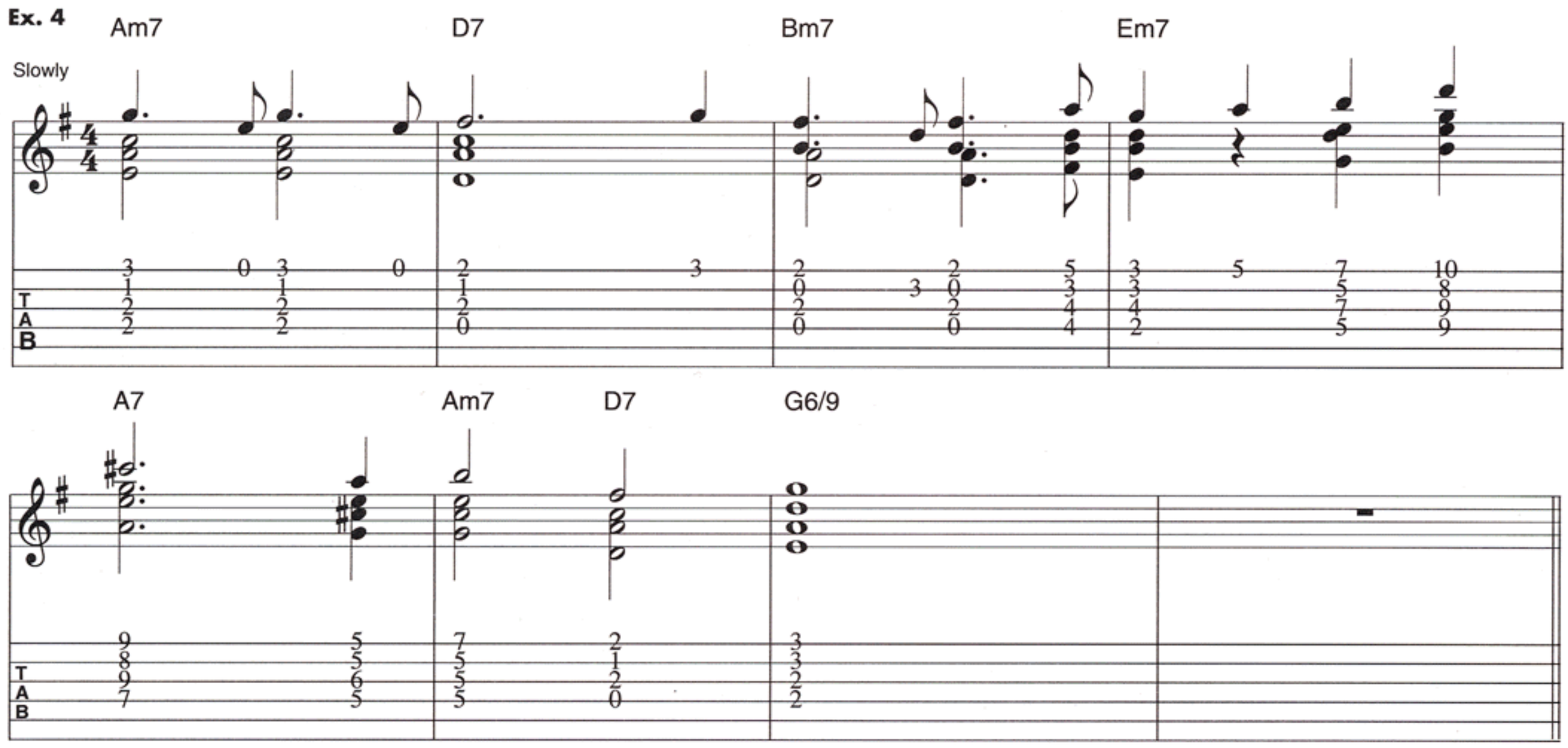
It's good to notate chord melodies when you're starting out, but I'd suggest getting away from it as soon as possible. Instead, learn to work from a lead sheet and your fretboard. Anticipate beats, rhythmically embellish phrases, and throw in an occasional lick to fill holes. This spontaneous approach will enhance your creativity and be a lot more fun. Following these guidelines won't turn you into Joe Pass, but someone is bound to say, "How'd you do that?"

Ex. 1 Dm7 = D F A C



Ex. 2 Gmaj7 = G B D F♯



Ex. 3

Ex. 4

"The real interesting guitar harmonies occur when they're crossing over, diverging, and converging." —Brian May, Jan. '83 GP